

'Flushing' out Ft. Lauderdale mayor

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By Paul Harris

Fort Lauderdale is not normally thought of as a hot bed of gay activism, since it's acquired the reputation of being a "Where the Boys Are" gay tourist destination. However, a casual remark made by the mayor has led to a firestorm, including calls for his resignation.

In early July, Jim Naugle, a Democrat and 16-year mayor of the South Florida resort, commented to a local journalist that installing a \$250,000 self-cleaning toilet near the gay section of the beach would help curb homosexual sex in public restrooms. He was also quoted as saying that he doesn't call homosexuals "gay" because most "aren't happy."

Within days of the publication of the article the Unite Fort Lauderdale organization was formed and its members called for the mayor to apologize. The group's founders are Waymon Hudson and Anthony Niedwiecki, who only a couple of months earlier had been in the papers when they were harangued at the local airport after a worker read a passage from Leviticus attacking men having sex with men over the public address system. The group contains a wide cross-section of people including Doug Cureton, the owner of the local gelato store, AIDS activists, a corporate trainer, and a handful of lawyers.

After Naugle refused to apologize the group created the Web site <http://www.FlushNaugle.org> and people started to send rolls of toilet paper to the mayor. What began as a small group of gay men talking about the issue over dinner at a local Mexican restaurant led to a public demonstration outside City Hall last week that attracted nearly 1,000 people. Among those speaking at the rally were **Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**; city and county commissioners; and Dean Trantalis, the former vice mayor of Fort Lauderdale who served alongside Naugle and who is himself gay. In a city better known for its political apathy, gay activism suddenly reached a level not seen since 1977, when the Anita Bryant controversy spilled over from nearby Miami-Dade County.

Foreman called Naugle's remarks a "stain" on the entire city and called on elected officials and religious leaders to denounce his comments.

"The mayor must be treated for the bigot he is and not be welcomed at any event where good people gather," Foreman said, according to a news release from NGLTF. "Anything less will not suffice."

At a news conference last week, Naugle refused to apologize.

Marc Paige, a longtime gay and AIDS activist, suggests that what has "awakened the 'sleeping giant' of activism in the city is not Unite Fort Lauderdale but Jim Naugle. We're not going backwards as a community as Naugle would like but we're going forward in spite of Jim Naugle's efforts and ignorance."

At the rally, held under dark threatening skies, Foreman described Naugle's language as not only insulting Fort Lauderdale's population but as "defaming all gay people coast to coast."

From being simply a response to Naugle's comments about the gay population, the movement has grown to include other people whom the mayor has offended over the years, including environmentalists, whom Naugle described as "a bunch of scientists meeting in Paris who've had too much wine;" African Americans; as well as those struggling to survive in a city with high housing costs, whom he accused of being "schlocks sitting on the sofa and drinking a beer, who won't work more than 40 hours a week."

The local business community is concerned that Naugle's anti-gay comments could adversely affect the tourist industry, which according to the Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau brought an estimated 950,000 LGBT visitors and \$1.2 billion to Fort Lauderdale last year. Last year the city ranked number six among gay travelers, beating out Miami, Orlando, and Chicago. Gay visitors accounted for about 11 percent of Broward County's \$8.5 billion tourism industry. Naugle has suggested that the city of Fort Lauderdale and Broward County "should review whether it really wants to promote tourism in the gay community because of the threat gays pose."

Bobby Kyser, owner of Petals Panache in Wilton Manors, described the area's economy "as being already fragile with the effects of rising taxes and insurance rates. A drop in tourism on top would affect every type of business and employment in the area."